

Love's Injunctions

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Driving through my childhood neighborhood in Van Buren, Arkansas, toward the old St. John's Methodist Church, I notice a dark line of chained-together auditorium seats placed under an aluminum canopy. I recognize those seats and then recall that Butterfield Junior High published an auction notice because of its recent remodeling. In my day, both junior and senior high school students utilized those seats for viewing school play productions, even a *Pirates of Penzance* operetta, assemblies that allowed traveling entertainers to show us human magic or the tricks of trained animals, and more serious matters as well. Recitals, graduations, and matters of public interest occurred in that brick auditorium. A matter of public interest took me to the auditorium on a September night in 1958, and my stand for integration of Van Buren High School that night created changes in my life that have continued for almost fifty years.

Coming back to Van Buren after my years in other states, I don't know the stranger who now owns the auditorium seats, nor the people, some brown-skinned with a different language, who live in the homes still associated in my mind with members of St. John's. Originally called "Long Bell" and then East Van Buren Methodist Episcopal Church, South, St. John's fusion with First Methodist produced Heritage United Methodist Church, a large congregation filled with newcomers my mother envisioned when she said "they will want something better for their children than we have." Although my mother supported the church merger, most of my extended family did not. Many members could not separate the old building from their experiences of church—sorrow and joy, tears of repentance and grace, christenings, funerals, and weddings of family members and church family.

St. John's was a neighborhood church, and my Dad, in moods of reminiscence, often said, "I don't know what we would have done without that little church." He was speaking of his brothers and sisters, his mother who was converted at age 38, and his father who became a member,

settled down, and reared their family of seven in the church, which happened to be next door. My mother sustained her stance for the absorption of little St. John's into a larger and stronger witness by remembering what my father always said, "Someday the church will have to relocate in order to grow. Without a vision, the people will perish." My Dad never quoted any other Bible verse in my memory, but he spoke of "vision" when he discussed church and life through the years. He died in 1978, and the merger and its struggles came seven years later.

Members who couldn't stand the change joined other denominations or a small Methodist church north of Van Buren or one across the river in Fort Smith, or they stopped attending. My mother was hurt by their hurt and by the criticism she received for supporting this merger she held up to be "for the sake of those who come after me." She lived long enough to see a few of the old members eventually return, and long enough to sacrifice a lot of comforts to pay her extra pledges for the building fund. Only through the windows of memory, which scan the long benches on each side of the sanctuary, am I able to see the faces of the saints of St. John's, and I gain strength from these memories.

My strength now is quite different now compared to how I experienced it almost fifty years ago when I and fellow student council friends filled eight of the auditorium seats on the night of September 9, 1958. White Citizens Council (WCC) members were seated around us, as were other citizens, and, as I realized later, several reporters. On the stage the school superintendent and the school board members appeared, as demanded by the WCC. The exchanges of the factions have receded into the windowless vault of my memory, but I do remember raising my hand to ask permission to state results from our student poll. I remember the enthusiasm of the WCC and how it quickly turned into angry insults when they heard most students preferred integration to school closure.

I walked home that night with my closest cousin, Kay, a year ahead of me in school and the editor of the yearbook. I don't remember if either of us had asked for specific permission to attend the meeting. In general, I was allowed to attend school functions if they were within walking distance of my home. Out-of-town ball games were too much worry for my Dad who feared accidents and illness, fires and flash floods. I know some of the student council members got in BIG trouble

with their parents for attending the meeting that night. The morning newspaper carried pictures of us with the story of our stand for integration. My husband, (then someone I barely knew, the boy in the striped shirt with a hand placed anxiously near his mouth in the September 22, 1958, issue of *Life* magazine) tells me he told his parents his intentions before the meeting. His Dad said, "O.K., this is your decision, but there's going to be trouble."

An avalanche of telegrams, mail, and repercussions of many sorts began the next day. The mail continued for more than a year, the repercussions longer. My parents' response to my stand for integration consisted of "you have a lot of mail again today" (my mother), and my Dad's two or three statements when referring to post cards from Las Vegas. These cards arrived at intervals, months apart but with the same handwriting, and they increasingly insisted I reverse my stand. "Those are death threats," he said. I didn't believe my Dad's interpretation of the postcards, but neither did I express my doubts, questions or feelings of any sort. Assassinations of white people who stood for integration did not occur, as far as I knew. Later, I learned differently.

Meanwhile, I felt little fear but a whole lot of loneliness. My loneliness came more from my parents' silence than from loss of friends or privileges. Not talking about family pain was a common characteristic of families in the 1950s, I think. Certainly, the '50s in Van Buren predated school counselors assigned to help students deal with feelings more painful than those related to college choices or interim coursework. Looking back, I think teachers and pupils, school officials and community persons may have offered me support and the opportunity to talk, but I was too uncomfortable with *any* mention of the topic of "my stand." I knew, although very quietly stated, if stated at all, that my parents did not want me in the spotlight, in plain sight for some stranger's agenda, good or bad. Personally, I deeply felt it would be wrong to receive benefit for doing something I knew the Holy Spirit's infusion had guided. I was to experience similar guidance at other times in my life, but the day and night of September 9, 1958 contained such a nearness of the Spirit that my actions unfolded as though they had been practiced for a lifetime, yet were completely new.

Preparation for the stand began the year before; this I realized almost immediately the day after my stand. I could trace this clear line

of the Spirit's work. Early on, I was also aware of the influence of two pastors. One preached the first sermon I heard regarding the Christian response to integration soon after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. The other pastor, Reverend William Wilder, was at St. John's when my stand occurred. Rev. Wilder took the full brunt of the repercussions. Now I am able to see thousands of impressions which propelled the direction of my stand. Then and now, I believe the idea of *how to take action* sprang from the Spirit's synthesis of my little bit of knowledge and deep conviction. A practical technique (the poll learned in a Student Council workshop at school the previous summer) and an inchoate desire to alleviate the crisis became a new creation. Although my sense of crisis had dead-locked my search for solutions, the Holy Spirit created order. Out of my desire and a small amount of knowledge He infused me with the inspiration for a plan of action.

I never doubted my action was right, a proper response to seeing people being mistreated. And I continued to believe the idea of *how to take right action* was mine alone, except for the help of the Holy Spirit. I reasoned that since the idea was mine alone, then no one but me should be hurt by it; and I didn't expect to be hurt much, if at all. By age fifteen, I had absorbed my parents' message that "if you try to do the right thing and do the best you can, things will work out just fine."

"Just fine" to me at the age of fifteen meant whatever outcome I might prefer. Now I know a deeper meaning, but then I was overwhelmed by the accumulation of mail and the accrual of other fall-out. In addition to reading the verbal insults in some of the letters that were addressed jointly to my parents and me, I was also seeing my parents' expressions when they answered the telephone. It helped me to receive affirmation for my stand from my sister and her husband in Connecticut, and it was good to know church members up there supported what my friends and I had done.

Foremost among the events for which I had no comfort was the news that my brother had been blacklisted from an organization he enjoyed very much. Then I learned my aunts were receiving hateful comments at meetings they attended, and even church members and life-long friends were making critical remarks to my parents. They didn't tell me any of this at the time. I overheard their low murmuring voices late at night. Guilt for their worry and the hurt of other family

members weighed me down. Years later I realized they had to worry about our livelihood as well as about me and the rest of the family. The timing of the incident was terrible as far as their financial well-being was concerned.

My Dad had just left his full-time job, without any retirement. He was a little over fifty years of age. Since the age of sixteen, he had worked in a factory six days a week. When a financial need pressed too hard, he added "projects"—a saw mill or floor sweep production, a house construction, or the restart of a neighborhood grocery in the little building between our house and St. John's.

Tired a lot, he didn't speak with much animation unless with his siblings at family get-togethers or when at home discussing his favorite topics—the marvels of electricity, Horatio Alger-type stories, and the magnificence of the Constitution of the United States. "Everybody, no matter who they are, where they came from, or what color they might be, has the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," he would say with pride and happiness in his voice.

The house he and my mom worked on at night finally reached move-in condition when I was in the eighth grade. We were then three blocks from St. John's. By the time I entered the tenth grade, my Dad was finishing up correspondence school for television and radio repair. My Mom and I took turns running the little grocery store next to St. John's. When some customers became aware of "what the Evanses' daughter did," they stopped coming in. I worried someone would throw rocks through the plate glass window, but as far as I know that never happened. I learned later that some people deliberately became customers of the store as a way to offer support to my family.

Later, while reading books during my college years, I heard God called the "Numinous Other" in an author's attempt to describe His holiness and separateness from humankind; but as early as age three or four, I felt Him to be wholly with us. His presence completely filled the small sanctuary made golden by light from windows that were embedded with tiny lines which prevented outdoor views. Much of my awareness of Him came from my mother's shift to a different way of being when we began to climb the twenty concrete steps to the front doors of the church. By the top step, three times higher than me, she was in worship that didn't cease until we left the sanctuary and passed the swinging doors to the foyer.

I had been confirmed in the faith at age nine when I experienced repentance. Disconfirmation of my faith occurred off and on into early adulthood, not only because of the normal doubting that occurs in adolescence, but also through listening to pastors who preached what manuscripts "suggested" rather than what the Good News of the Gospel promised, or what Jesus' presence in their lives meant. My early foundation was strong. Between seven and fourteen, the preaching of Reverend Robert Paul Sessions challenged and deepened my Christian experience and that of many of us. It was not just Brother Bob's pulpit presence, but the quality of his caring which made real the claims of Christ. Brother Bob allowed teenagers, as well as adults, to express thoughts and concerns. Doubts could be described and explored. He told us about some of his experiences with Jesus, and he told us about things that were to come into our lives. Integration was one of these.

The experience of Brother Bob's caring, more than his impelling, added to my own capacity to care. The direction of my stand for integration had a foundation in his ministry, as well as my mother's saying, "Oh, I wonder how (someone) must be feeling." "Don't you know he/she must be (hurt, or sad, or upset) by this (some hardship)?" *How someone feels* became part my awareness and concern.

Reverend William Wilder came to St. John's in 1956 after Brother Bob moved. My pastor during my stand for integration, Rev. Wilder made a significant impression on my life. One of his sermons contained the concept of "magnanimity." Rev. Wilder helped me understand that "unselfish" means more than passive sharing; it means active giving—the seeking out of those stranded in the byways and elevating them to the first place at the table. The meaning of this word and his life continue to call me. Not until the 1990s, when I listened to a man tell of the death of his wife from cancer, did the word achieve full vividness. Rev. Wilder told us magnanimity was open-handedness in giving and forgiving. The young widower described his wife as a young woman who ran toward life "with her hands held wide open." I saw more clearly that open-handedness allows us to fully receive and to enjoy, as well as freely give. During my own adult experiences of loss or discouragement or doubt, I am comforted by the memory of Rev. Wilder's faith, especially the grounding which anchors me when I remember the hymn he chose in the hardest of times: "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ,

her Lord." Each time I sing it, I more deeply realize He is truly the "author and finisher of our faith."

Some of St. John's members vocally opposed Rev. Wilder's defense of integration, harassing his family and him for their beliefs. Some church members sent food to the white boys as they picketed against integration at the school. I knew most of the boys on strike and some of their supporters. I knew the boys who attended my grade school had never liked school. I never perceived them to be particularly mean or hate-filled. In my view, these boys had hearts filled with the hope of "getting our school closed" because people had succeeded in closing the doors of Little Rock's Central High School rather than integrating. The boys perceived an advantage for themselves in our crisis, and advantage for themselves outran their concern for others.

At age fifteen, I was poorly equipped to handle the mail and phone calls which either requested me to say more for integration, or recant my stand. I deeply disliked the mail which contained charges that Communists controlled white liberals and people like me who were contributing to the weakening and death of our country. I did like the *New York Herald Tribune's* September 13, 1958, front page story, "Segregation is not Christian." This and other publications posed my question of "How do you think it makes them feel" to the White Citizens' Council members who wanted the thirteen black children to leave our school. Now as an adult, I more clearly see that whipping up fears and pointing to conspiracies and plots often mask the fight for self-advantage.

Although comfort came from the compliments of people at school and church and via mail (which included letters from foreign missionaries saying my stand helped them convince people in their parts of the world that the Christian God loves everyone and is *for* them, not just for Americans or white people), I increasingly felt upset and confused, as well as guilty and alone. I was relieved we were experiencing a normal school year with its ball games and fun, but I was not having much fun.

Although my mother frequently said she was proud of all three of her kids, she rarely told us so individually. Not until 1984 when her broken hip forced a hospitalization, did I really know my mother was proud of me, specifically for my integration stand. Her hospital roommate happened to be a lady who introduced herself and then apologized for calling me names after my stand for integration. For months, the lady had

come out of her house to call me names when she saw me walking by. To my mother she explained, "Back then I had hate in my heart, but now I'm a Christian. I'm different now, and I love everyone no matter their color, and I'm sorry for the way I used to be—and what I did."

My mother's reverence for God and concern for others contributed to my stand. My Dad's joy in the Constitution and belief in the rights and bright prospects for every individual convinced me that each of us, all of us, could progress. The preaching of gifted and caring pastors strengthened and guided my convictions. The nurture of the saints cultivated a desire for good for everyone. Little fragments of conversations, glances, and expectations helped equipped me. I believed I was valuable. I felt I had the right to privilege, even the privilege of making a difference.

As early as age six, I noticed the "separate but equal" elementary school designated for African Americans in Van Buren was separate but far from equal. Their building was ugly and had outdoor toilets, conditions the other two white elementary schools in town had overcome. In Van Buren, African American children rode a bus to attend junior high and high school in Fort Smith, thirty-five miles away. Some black families moved away in order to further their children's education, and some sent their children to live in a town with a high school. Some children ceased attending school altogether.

When I had occasion to ride the city bus to Fort Smith for violin lessons or to visit larger stores, I saw tired, silent people. Men, white and black, carried dome-shaped lunch boxes and wore overalls or khakis dirty from a day's work, but the men in the back of the bus laughed with each other. Lines of fatigue left their faces. As I grew older and learned more in school, I began to wonder if people who had survived slavery naturally possessed genes that endowed vitality to their descendants. While working with my husband as a missionary on an Indian reservation and other places where ethnics congregate without observation from members of a majority, I observed a talent for laughing, for enjoying the small events of living, and I've come to a conclusion: Ethnic people, because of marginalization or oppression, have learned "to hurry up and enjoy *now*" because tomorrow things may get worse.

Years later while living in Atlanta and completing my doctorate at Georgia Institute of Technology, I saw thousands of middle class homes whose owners and residents were African Americans. These neighbor-

hoods were no different than those of middle-class whites. Some of the largest, most luxurious homes in Atlanta were owned by the few African Americans who had become wealthy. In Van Buren, I had seen African Americans living only on Pickett Hill or in a minor holler near 14th Street, and they appeared poorer than most of the white people, even though there were a lot of very poor white people. My children, who grew up in Atlanta, barely believed stories of separate water fountains for "whites" and "colored." They saw no reason for people to be separated into groups of white or black.

Today, people who have moved to the Van Buren area due to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita after never having lived outside the "projects" in Louisiana, have made it clear to my children, now in their 30s, that "class" (controlled by poverty, ignorance, oppression, and sin) creates great deficits in people, black and white. If poverty is a result of that oppression, the deficits ooze from great wounds. Oppression most surely devastates if parents have been brutalized and in turn brutalize their children. Cesspools of every kind of degradation describe some of the human habitations—not worthy to be called homes—that existed in the New Orleans projects before the hurricanes. Schools could not or did not make up the difference.

In late August 2006, I read a newspaper report that children in northern Louisiana had been segregated on the bus, with the African American children behind the white children. Such treatment stamps in the thoughts that "you're last," "you're behind all relevant others." I *do not want* to believe the intent was oppression, but whatever the intent, I know that slights smaller than this do not create a sense of ability and access. I don't believe Christians want to create second class citizens. All of us, oppressed and oppressors and silent observers who let it happen, will be hurt. While some of us find aggrandizement of self by having others "below us," this kind of pride is preyed upon by the powerful who are self-seeking. Economic exploitation of any group eventually costs everyone too much, I believe.

A current colleague in Fort Smith, where I work with people who are seriously and chronically mentally ill, including evacuees from the hurricanes, tells me certain towns in Arkansas are known to restrict the influx of African Americans. This colleague also sharply rebuked me for quoting verbatim my Auntie, born in 1899, who spoke of "Negroes." In

the 1950s, such was the polite word, but I was horrified to realize that I had hurt him by even saying the word "Negro." I apologized and meant it. I more deeply realize labels associated with race, gender, sexual orientation, and national origin perpetuate lack of equality. Each of us desires to be known by name rather than by category.

I recognize that I am much more afraid of taking a stand now than when I was fifteen, and maturity has given me much more admiration and respect for those who preached justice when they knew it would bring certain trouble. I am grateful for all those who upheld love's injunctions even when the peace became disturbed and broken for the sake of making the circle larger. I also now recognize the tremendous power of caring and uncaring acts. Small acts of kindness, or disregard, appear impotent when I'm tired, but I am strengthened by the Scripture's injunction to nevertheless "cast our bread on the water." The return on these investments, like faith, is often unseen. Self-discipline and holy effort require more strength than I feel, frequently. I admire people who live out their faith with holy effort and self-discipline, never once receiving honor from the world's press or their church.

I know my stand required less of me than my sister's years of service to the world as a public school teacher. I know that life doesn't turn out "just fine" for many people who try very hard to do the right thing. I have learned that dark nights of the soul serve their purpose. I have learned that apology and remediation come years after only a moment of rejection and hate. Love given correctly never requires apology, and rejection and hate can be overcome. I know now that acts of courage, large or small, bring consequences as well as blessings; but, I increasingly recognize that the gifts of others, courageous or mundane, have blessed me beyond the givers' awareness or my thanks.

Today, surrounding the school auditorium, now empty of the seats where I and student council members stood up for integration, new buildings offer air conditioning and other modern conveniences. But years ago, before St. John's Church had a building in which to worship, trees provided shade for Sunday school classes begun as outreach to the Long Bell Community in Van Buren. Men, after full days of work, dug and walled a basement while women kept food supplied to them during these volunteer efforts after dark. Two more years of brick-laying and framing by church members built the sanctuary of Long Bell Methodist

Church/East Van Buren Methodist/St. John's Methodist Church, the neighborhood church which so blessed Mr. and Mrs. Jess N. Evans, Sr., and their children and grandchildren. Now, the merged successor, Heritage United Methodist Church, ministers to and through the grandchildren and even the great-great grandchildren of the first Evans to become part of the circle of fellowship in the Methodist Church in Van Buren, Arkansas.

Many commitments I need to keep are for the sake of those I will never know and the children who will come after me. These commitments at times seem to be of little importance and as inconvenient as holding Sunday school with only shade of a tree for air conditioning, but I continue to learn that the abundant life is in "seeing with eyes to see and ears to hear" the Spirit's prompts. I am convinced small acts of regard for others, like the loaves of bread, can be increased by God's grace, and I know love's injunctions continue to call me to action. Thanks be to God.